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THE LIFE OF DISRAELI, V., VI.¹

THE two concluding volumes of Disraeli's life which have now been published complete one of the longest and most interesting biographies that has appeared in our language during the last hundred years. On whatever side he is regarded, Disraeli is as singular and indeed as unique and extraordinary a figure as English history presents, a man who, beginning as a Jewish adventurer, and incurring in some quarters dislike, in other quarters contempt, by the escapades of his earlier career, rose to the leadership of what was then still the aristocratic party in what was then still an aristocratic country, and ended by becoming, once in 1868 and again in 1874, Prime Minister. His personal character is a subject for enquiry hardly less curious than is his political career. It is however only with the latter that this Review is concerned, so we may pass by the revelations of his private life and personal tastes which this biography contains, to consider his career in the three aspects in which his action had political consequences and provides lessons which political history ought to note and record.

First, of his career as a personal success. It illustrates two significant propositions, one at least of which is apt to receive less attention than it deserves, *viz.*, the immense difference to the course of events made by what we call Chance, *i. e.*, that factor in human affairs which we cannot predict nor account for. In this instance what chance did was to create a free field for Disraeli's rise to power by withdrawing from that field all the men who could otherwise have competed with him for the leadership of the Tory party, and some at least of whom had prospects brighter than were his. The great schism in the Conservative party when four-fifths of it refused to follow Sir Robert Peel's free-trade policy carried out of it Gladstone and three other statesmen of great ability, Sir James Graham, Sydney Herbert, and Cardwell, and none of them ever returned to the Tory fold. Of the two most prominent and energetic leaders who remained, one, Lord George Bentinck, died suddenly in the prime of life; the other, Lord Derby, sat in the House of Lords. No member of the party fit to lead the Con-

¹ *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield*, by George Earle Buckle in succession to W. F. Monypenny. Volumes V. and VI. (New York, Macmillan Company, 1920, pp. xii, 558; 712. \$6.00.)

servatives in the Commons was left except Disraeli. Lord Derby, brilliant as a speaker, was lazy, and apt to be bored by the details of politics, so he, while remaining titular leader till 1867, allowed nearly everything to be dealt with by Disraeli as leader in the Commons. The other lesson of Disraeli's life is the immense power of courage, industry, perseverance, and self-reliance. These qualities covered all the drawbacks that told against Disraeli's success; and made his followers lenient to faults which would have submerged less strenuous men, faults which included an unscrupulousness and untruthfulness rare in that generation of English statesmen.

The second question which history asks regarding Disraeli's part in politics is that by which politicians are in the long run most adequately judged. What did he do for England? His opportunities for administrative work were slender, as he had held no office, until he became Prime Minister, except that of Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister), and that post only for very short periods. But he had at one time or another much patronage to dispense, and in dispensing it set no good example, for he seems to have usually thought first of politics and afterwards of merit. That practice had formerly been common enough in England among both Whigs and Tories, but in the days of Peel and John Russell things were improving, and a stronger sense of responsibility for selecting the best men, irrespective of party affiliations, was growing up. That sense Disraeli did not share. With him it was politics "first, last, and all the time". His letters about preferments to bishoprics and deaneries in the Church of England are not edifying reading. He attached far more political importance to ecclesiastical appointments than they have now, and, I venture to believe, overestimated their serviceability for party purposes even in his own time. As respects legislation, his only title to fame lies in the passing of the Reform Act of 1867-1868, by which the suffrage was extended in the English boroughs to an extent which went further than the Liberals, led by John Russell and Gladstone, had proposed to go in 1866. Disraeli deserves great credit for having perceived that the admission to the electoral franchise of the working-men in the towns need not injure his party. The result justified his foresight, yet not immediately. He was beaten at the general election of 1868, but after six years of a Liberal government (1868 to 1874) the Tories obtained a majority. They did so again in 1886, after the question of Home Rule for Ireland had divided the Liberal party, and again in 1895 and

1900. But though Disraeli had in his earlier days indicated various topics, including reforms in Ireland, on which legislation was needed, he did very little at the height of his power between 1874 and 1880 to carry out any of these, partly perhaps because he was then old and sickly, partly because foreign politics absorbed all his faculties. He is not remembered in England as a constructive statesman.

It is in the third aspect of his career, that of foreign affairs, that he finds a place in world history. In those affairs he had always been keenly interested, for they appealed not only to his imagination, but also to his vanity, as opening to him opportunities for playing a part in the great theatre of Europe. The views he held about foreign policy were formed early in life and little changed thereafter. He had read a good deal of history, and gathered from it certain definite ideas or principles which remained with him as fixed principles or maxims, sometimes erroneous, and very little modified by events, for having ceased to travel abroad he had failed to comprehend how much the emergence of new forces, economic and intellectual, had made the Europe of 1875 different from the Europe of 1845. He had no more sympathy with either the love of liberty or the sentiment of nationality than had Metternich, showed no good-will to the Italians in their struggles against Austria and their domestic tyrants, and deplored the extinction of the temporal power of the pope in 1870. He was, like most cynics, a worshipper of power and relied on material force to the disparagement of those other means by which order and peace may be maintained within a state or between other states. He had imagination and brilliant literary gifts, as his novels show, and a faith in certain ideas or doctrines, doctrines which when pushed to extremes distorted his vision of facts. In early life he had wandered through the Near East and seems to have contracted there an aversion for the Christian subjects of Turkey which helped to make him insensible to the miseries and oppressions they suffered at the hands of their Turkish rulers.

These influences must be allowed for in judging the course he pursued in the momentous years 1875 to 1880, for through that quinquennium his fixed views and strenuous will governed the foreign policy of England. These were also the last years in which his action counted for anything, since he lost office when defeated at the polls in 1880, and died in April, 1881. An insurrection against the Turks in Herzegovina in 1875 and a subsequent attack by the Serbians on Turkey were followed in 1876 by an attempted

rising of the Bulgarian Christians in Thrace against their Turkish oppressors. This movement was suppressed by the Turks with circumstances of atrocious cruelty in which many thousands of innocent persons who had taken no part in the rising were slaughtered. Massacre is the expedient to which the Turks always resort; their limited intelligence, incapable of reforming their administration, flies at once to bloodshed. When the facts became known in Russia, they aroused passionate indignation, and the Czar Alexander II., found himself obliged to take strong diplomatic action against the Turkish government, insisting on concessions which, while deemed necessary for the protection of the Christian populations, would have materially reduced the authority of the Turks over them. Austria and Germany, who had already joined with Russia in remonstrances and demands addressed to the Turks, invited England to concur. Disraeli held this to be derogatory to the dignity and rights of England, which was no less interested than the three continental powers in the fate of the East, and he refused to concur. Meantime the news of the Bulgarian massacres had reached England and stirred indignation there, which grew hotter when Gladstone took the field and advocated the complete liberation of the Bulgarians from a government which had forfeited whatever legal rights it had over them. The Turks were obdurate, and Russia threatened war. Disraeli insisted, and carried his sometimes rather reluctant cabinet with him in insisting that Russia must under no circumstances be allowed to occupy Constantinople, her possession of which would be—so he argued—a danger to England and especially to English rule in India. An attempt made to adjust matters by a diplomatic conference at Constantinople failed, owing to the obstinacy of the sultan. Russia declared war, and after more than a year's fighting dictated to the Turks, under the walls of Constantinople, a peace embodied in the Treaty of San Stefano.

Public opinion in England was by this time thoroughly roused, hotter on both sides of the question than it had been since the American Civil War, twelve years before. Disraeli seems, from the letters given in this biography, to have honestly believed that the victory of Russia would be a heavy blow to the position of England in the world. Though himself of foreign origin, and in a certain sense always a foreigner, he outdid most native Englishmen in his Orientaly florid glorification of English power and prestige, and so became the creator of that school of imperialism, or, more colloquially, "jingoism", which remained a potent factor

for thirty years after his death. He did not venture to urge his colleagues into hostilities when Russia declared war, because he and they realized how unwilling Englishmen would be to fight with Turks as their allies; but now when he feared that Russia would occupy and dominate the East from Constantinople he redoubled his efforts to stop her advance. At last, his menacing attitude having alarmed the Russian government, which was not prepared for another war, their resources having been already overtaxed, it was agreed that the Treaty of San Stefano should be submitted to a congress of the Great Powers. Such a congress was accordingly held at Berlin under the presidency of Bismarck in the summer of 1878. Before it met, Disraeli and his Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury (who had shortly before succeeded to that office on the resignation of Lord Derby, who disapproved of Disraeli's policy), concluded two secret agreements. One was with the Turks. By it England undertook to guarantee the defense of the Turkish provinces in northern Asia Minor, and received in return the control and administration of Cyprus as a "place of arms" from which that defense might be conducted, the Turks promising to reform their administration. The other convention was made with the Russians, and by it they agreed to modifications of the Treaty of San Stefano restoring to the sultan large districts in Thrace and Macedonia which that treaty had allotted to the new principality of Bulgaria. These secret arrangements settled in advance the most controversial and difficult questions which were to come before the congress, so its success was almost assured. Not a few points, however, remained for discussion and negotiation, and in settling these Disraeli, who had gone to Berlin as chief British plenipotentiary, showed both adroitness and firmness. He knew what he wanted; he played for it and he got it. He established excellent relations with Bismarck, who recognized in him an audacity and resolution resembling his own. "The old Jew," said the Chancellor, "that is the man!" He was, with Bismarck, the leading figure in the most important international gathering Europe had seen since the Congress of Vienna, and he divided with the Man of Blood and Iron the honors of the hour, having indeed a more difficult part to play as one of the contending parties than that which fell to the president of the congress, whose interest in the matter was far less keen, since German interests were little affected. It was the proudest moment of Disraeli's life. When he returned to England he was welcomed by enthusiastic crowds; and his policy, though attacked by the Liberal opposition, was approved

not perhaps by the bulk of the nation, but certainly by large majorities in both Houses of Parliament.

His biographer, who throughout the book displays a thoroughgoing admiration for his hero and all his hero did, natural in a political partizan speaking at the moment, but surprising in a historian narrating events in cold blood after the lapse of forty years, becomes effusive in his description of these triumphs. If we look only at the talent and the force which Disraeli showed, the admiration is justified. What he meant to do he did effectively. But was it the right thing to do? Did the settlement he effected last? What were its results for the countries concerned and for the world?

Taking first the European settlement, that branch of it which concerned the Eastern part of the Bulgarian regions (to which the Treaty of Berlin gave the name of Eastern Rumelia), the settlement lasted just seven years. In 1885 the artificial and indefensible separation of two parts of the same people was removed, and "Eastern Rumelia" became, with universal approval, a part of Bulgaria. Disraeli's arrangements had no basis, and vanished. But far worse was the fate of those regions north of the Aegean Sea, inhabited by a predominantly Bulgarian population, which the Treaty of Berlin handed back to the sultan, from whose rule the Treaty of San Stefano had delivered them. The provision made for a scheme which should give some protection to the Christian inhabitants was never carried out. Misgovernment and oppression continued, as every one with experience of the Turks knew that they were sure to continue. After a time risings and disturbances appeared. The Bulgarian population of Macedonia was in a state of continued unrest. The insurgent bands which carried on what was a sort of guerrilla warfare against the Turks roused the antagonism of Serbs and Greeks, who, expecting the expulsion of the Turks sooner or later, raised other armed bands to assert their claims in Macedonia in opposition to the Bulgars. The Turkish authorities, unable to cope with these disorders, did their best to set each race against the others. After some thirty years of these troubles, inflicting endless suffering on the peaceful part of the population, a league of the three Christian kingdoms, Greeks, Serbs, and Bulgars, was brought about, largely by the instrumentality of an able Englishman (the late Mr. J. D. Bourchier), Balkan correspondent of the London *Times*; and the three nations joined (1912) in an attack on the Turks which drove the latter out of the whole peninsula, except a small district near Constanti-

nople. Unhappily there followed a dispute between the three allies over the liberated territories, and another war broke out (in 1913) between them, as a result of which the Turks recovered a part of what Bulgaria had obtained in 1912 and Bulgaria lost southern Macedonia with its Bulgar population. All this long-continued strife, all these miseries, were directly due to Disraeli's perverse action at Berlin when he insisted, in the name of "British interests", on restoring to the Turks territories which were not Turkish by race or religion and to which they had, by their abominable misgovernment, lost all moral claim. Nor did the train of evil consequences stop there. The Treaty of San Stefano, forced by Russia upon the Turkish government, which Disraeli succeeded in getting abrogated at Berlin, had made a territorial settlement of Southeastern Europe which was, broadly speaking, conformable to the racial, the linguistic, and the ecclesiastical conditions of the problem. Austria having obtained at Berlin what she wanted, *viz.*, a commission from the congress to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina, was fairly content, and there was no question then left open to encourage the further ambitions which she subsequently developed and which accentuated her rivalry with Russia. It was the unstable, because unjust and indefensible, state of things due to the Treaty of Berlin that not only subjected the population of Macedonia and Thrace to Turkish tyranny for more than thirty years, but also helped to bring about the Great War of 1914, and all those consequences of that war from which the world is still suffering.

If we turn to the results in Asia of what Disraeli secured at Berlin they will prove to have been no less disastrous. By the Treaty of San Stefano the sultan had ceded some territory in Armenia to Russia, and had given Russia the right to interfere at any time for the protection of the Asiatic Christians under Turkish rule. This right, which made the Czar, whose territory adjoined the parts of Asiatic Turkey inhabited by the Armenians, responsible, in the eyes of his own people and of the world, for the safety from massacre of the Eastern Christians, was taken from Russia by the Treaty of Berlin, which substituted a provision enabling the powers who were parties to the latter treaty to require the Turks to execute reforms and to supervise their application. Everybody who knew anything of Turkish history knew perfectly well that administrative reforms—which the sultans had been promising for many a year—would never be executed, and that the Great Powers, among whom this shadowy responsibility was divided, would

never compel their execution. This was exactly what happened. Turkish oppression grew to be worse than ever, and culminated in the frightful massacres of 1894, 1895, and 1896, when more than 100,000 innocent persons were slaughtered. Nothing was done to stop the slaughter. England alone had tried from time to time to put pressure on the Turks to better their ways, but as she received no support from the other signatories of the Treaty of Berlin, her intervention may possibly have done more harm than good, for it did not frighten Abdul Hamid, so long as no other power joined England,—and it may have led that suspicious and resentful savage to the conclusion, which he tried to put in practice in 1895, that the best way to get rid of the Armenian question was to get rid of the Armenians themselves.

The Cyprus Convention which was proclaimed in 1878 to have been a master-stroke of Disraeli's policy turned out a complete fiasco. Some British military consuls were appointed to posts in Armenia, and for a time they travelled about trying to give some protection to the Christians from the ferocities and oppressions of the Turkish officials and from the raids of the robber Kurds whom the Turks were constantly hounding on to attack and rob the Christians. But their attempts were unavailing, for the Turks refused to mend their ways; so after a few years the consuls were withdrawn in despair, and England's obligation to defend the frontiers of Turkey was tacitly understood to have lapsed, because the Turks never attempted the promised reforms. Whether the convention entitled England to continue to hold Cyprus was a question never formally raised. That island, though it continued to be administered by England, did not prove to be of value to her either as a "place of arms" or otherwise. It might have been of value, not indeed for defending Turkey, but for attacking her when she declared war against England in 1914; but it was not used for that purpose.

Whoever reads the history of Disraeli's action in Near Eastern affairs from 1875 to 1880, told very fully and clearly in this book, and then proceeds to follow out the melancholy consequences which followed from it will naturally ask: How came a man of so much talent and experience to make such deplorable mistakes, and how came a large section of the English people to applaud a series of acts which were to tarnish England's good name by committing her to the support of a detestable tyranny and by injuring those whom the English people would have desired to protect? There are some persons who, like Disraeli's worshipping biographer, still

try to excuse or palliate Disraeli's policy and conduct. One can account for his conduct, one can recognize the cleverness and boldness with which he played his game against Russia. But the aims were hopelessly wrong, and he ought to have known that they were wrong. About the results there can be no question. The facts as they developed themselves in Europe and Asia from 1878 to 1914 speak for themselves. It was Disraeli's successor in the leadership of Disraeli's party who said, long afterwards, in speaking of the policy which British statesmen followed in the Crimean War and down to and even after 1878, in supporting the Turks, "We put our money on the wrong horse."

The explanation of Disraeli's errors seems to lie in certain facts, conjectured at the time, but rendered clearer by the correspondence which sees the light in this book, facts which may be summarized as follows. He was possessed, or obsessed, by certain notions which he had formed long before and had never brought himself to examine and correct in the light of facts. His conservative instincts made him cling to things as they had stood when he first saw them, and fail to realize the changes which had made existing conditions indefensible. Gladstone once said of him to me, in or about 1876, "Disraeli's two leading ideas in foreign policy have always been the maintenance of the sultan at Constantinople and the maintenance of the temporal power of the pope." He could not save the latter, which fell in 1870; he sought to save the former. His aversion to sentimentalism, his sense of the danger of popular enthusiasms, made him dislike the sympathy shown in England for the oppressed Christians of the East, and filled him with dread of the plots which, as he believed, were being planned by revolutionary societies against the sultan, though the Russian agitation over the Bulgarian massacres, and of course the English agitation also, were open-air and entirely natural. Though often kindly toward individuals—there is abundant proof of this in his letters—he was a cynic who indulged, and enjoyed, his cynicism. He was ignorant, though perhaps no more ignorant than many other statesmen in his day, of things he ought to have known, overestimating the aggressive power of Russia and the dangers to England of her advance southward, though the campaign of 1877 had proved the truth of Moltke's dictum that a war between Russians and Turks was a war between the one-eyed and the blind. Every war has shown that however great the difficulties Russia offers to an invading army, corruption and maladministration immensely reduce her offensive power. Still more

did he err in supposing it possible to induce the Turks to reform their government so as to make it even tolerable to its Christian subjects. Here, if he did not deliberately shut his eyes to facts, he showed a culpable ignorance, for the evidence of Turkish irreclaimability had been accumulating for centuries. He had so often heard such words as justice, humanity, liberty, nationality, used or misused by those whom, often quite unjustly, he deemed demagogues or charlatans, that he suspected every cause on whose behalf those words were employed. The mistakes he committed from 1875 to 1880 were remarkable in this respect, that they extended to a matter on which he was usually shrewdly penetrating, *viz.*, the feelings of the British people, for he seems to have believed that the diplomatic triumphs he achieved at Berlin had won their sympathy and approval, and he was not undeceived until the general election of 1880, when a crushing majority of the electorate was recorded against his foreign policy in its spirit, as well as in its details.

This defeat was no doubt partly due to the Afghan war in which his government embarked in the end of 1878; but the general political issues involved in that war so much resembled those which he had dealt with in the Near East during the three preceding years that the judgment of the country was delivered on both together and for much the same reasons. It was a condemnation of the sort of imperialism he had been preaching and practising. The frontier questions relating to Afghanistan were ultimately settled not by him but by the Liberal government which succeeded him, and they need not be discussed here. Enough to say that the policy of advance which he favored was by them reversed, and that things have gone better on the northwest frontier of India ever since.

American students of the British Constitution who read the long series of letters which passed between Disraeli and Queen Victoria during his two administrations may be struck by the number and the urgency of the appeals she made to him to take the action she desired in public affairs. Such readers must however note and remember that there is nothing to show that these appeals had any influence on the action which the cabinet took. Disraeli was of her mind, as she was of Disraeli's mind, all through the various phases of the Eastern question. She wished him to go further and faster than he did go, for his colleagues sometimes applied the brake, but he would apparently have gladly gone both farther and faster if he could have carried his cabinet with him. He certainly did flatter her outrageously, but this was not so much

interested adulation as an imaginative dramatization of the sovereign and himself as figures on the great stage of Britain. When he had a decided view of his own which was not hers, he could hold his own, and she gave way. Nobody in England has now any fear of interference on the part of the crown, for the conduct both of the last sovereign, Edward VII., and of the present sovereign is understood to have been irreproachably constitutional in every respect, and has never elicited popular criticism. The belief, at one time general in Germany, that Edward VII. was the author of the so-called "encircling policy" (*Einkreisungspolitik*) had no foundation. King Edward was fond of the French, but not the malicious enemy of Germany which he was in that country deemed to be.

Disraeli was one of the last among English statesmen who made their reputation and kept their power entirely by work in Parliament, with little recourse to the platform. Though he was far indeed from being the oracle of wisdom which the rank and file of his party deemed him in his later years, though many British statesmen have risen high above him both in range of knowledge and in oratory, he has been seldom equalled and perhaps never surpassed in his sarcastic wit, in skill as a parliamentary tactician, and, in his later years, in the power of inspiring confidence in his leadership. This confidence was largely due to his imperturbable coolness and to his courage. No braver or more self-confident man ever faced a legislative assembly; and though he was sometimes vindictive, and often untruthful, he was never treacherous, never unfaithful to a friend or neglectful of a supporter. No one can help admiring the fortitude with which he faced ill-health and pain; no one can refuse to feel for him when after his wife's death he turned for sympathy to the ladies whose names meet us so often in the record of his later years.

Mr. Buckle has done his work as a biographer with laudable industry and care. The notes are very helpful, the index is a model, the narrative passages interspersed between the letters are clear and concise. The personal and political bias of his comments is regrettable, but though they affect its value as a historical record to the general reader, every American student will soon discover and will thereafter allow for it. Long as is this biography, there is not a chapter in the last two volumes that could be spared, for they are full of instruction not only to the historian but to the student of politics as an art or a science. Disraeli made in his personal career, as well as by his acts, a contribution of enduring interest to our knowledge of human nature.

BRYCE.